POULTRY RAISING FOR THE BLIND.

Michael Delong.

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Dollars and Sense

The way to make money is to begin. This may sound foolish, but the hundreds of thousands of people who would like to make a lot of money are not making it because they are waiting for this or that or the other thing to happen.

Poultry Raising for the Blind

Experiences of Michael Delong as Told to Cathe Hille

"WHY not poultry raising as an occupation for the blind?"

After seven years' successful experience with a flock of commercial layers, Michael DeLong, of Allentown, Pa., feels this may be one satisfactory answer to the oft-repeated question, "What can the blind worker do that is profitable and socially useful?"

"When I became blind in 1931," says Mr. DeLong, "I searched for a new way to earn my living. The usual vocations open to the blind—rug weaving, broom making, and the like, did not appeal to me. I wanted something different. One day as I sat mulling over the possibilities that were open to me—and they seemed mighty few indeed—the thought occurred, 'Why not try chickens?' As a boy my family had always had a few hens. Although I had never been around poultry in my adult years, I kept my interest in them and felt sure somehow in spite of my blindness I could manage a flock."

First Essentials

"There are several ways for the blind person to start a flock," said Mr. DeLong with a smile. "Of course, the choice depends to some extent on where you live, your capital, your percentage of vision if any, and the amount of sighted assistance you can command."

The majority of commercial growers usually use one of two methods. They incubate eggs from good stock, hatch the chicks, and brood them with some type of heat until they are old enough to be placed on range. Incubation would be very difficult for the blind breeder, Mr. DeLong believes, since the temperature must be controlled to an exact degree to insure a successful hatch. In any event, many breeders feel that home incubation does not result in much of a saving.

The second and most common way to start is to buy day-old chicks and put them under a coal, oil, or electric brooder stove with a hover until they are about eight weeks old. If the weather is warm, they are then introduced to the range. This is the method Mr. DeLong first tried.

"The first year I was in business I put in an early order for day-old chicks. It was so early in fact that my chicks were delivered in a blizzard! Not a very good beginning. I felt each chick as I unpacked the box to note its size, build, and liveliness. The dead or sick ones I discarded. The others I put in the house where I had made ready a hovered coal brooder stove fired to a comfortable temperature, with food and water set out. Although some of the chicks were frozen and the rest were pretty cold, we saved the majority and the hatchery allowed a refund.

"While a brooder room requires a warm temperature, it need not be kept at such an exact degree as in the incubators, and the average blind operator can feel any unusual drop or rise in temperature as he enters his brooder house. He can feel around the hover for the chicks. If the chicks are out and active in the room, then he knows it is warm enough. If they huddle in bunches, then, of course, it is too cold.

"I had no difficulty in finding and filling the feed and water hoppers, for I set them down carefully in the same place each time. I learned to gauge the chicks' normal food requirements very accurately by using the same measuring tin each day. If they fell off in consumption, it was usually the first and clearest indication that all was not well and I could act accordingly."

Although Mr. DeLong got along well, he feels there are two disadvantages for the blind worker in this method of brooding. He is apt to step on and crush the chicks as he works around them. Then, too, without the help of some sighted member of his family it is difficult to tell when chicks have died. Since mortality is relatively high in such young birds, it is important to watch this.

The next year Mr. DeLong determined to

try another method of starting a flock—the use of battery pens. This is one of the newer methods popular with large commercial flocks. Grown pullets at laying age are purchased and installed in a battery cage for the remainder of their laying life.

"It is certainly a convenient way to start a flock," he admits, "but there are drawbacks. First, it is expensive to buy the grown sexed birds and also the metal batteries. Secondly, you must be sure you find an absolutely reliable dealer who will give you good birds and not culls. Most people are not anxious to part with a good ready-to-lay bird at any price. Thirdly, you must find the exact formula on which the birds have been fed before they come to you, so that you can use the same, working slowly over to your own type of feed.

"I had difficulty with this feed problem the second year I was in business, and tried batteries. My birds went into a molt from the new mash I gave them, which seriously retarded their laying. So all in all it was not very profitable for me.

Combination Battery Brooder Method

"The third year I worked out a combination of the two methods indicated and evolved what you might call 'The Blind School of Poultry Raising.' It is inexpensive and allows me to be completely independent of any sighted assistance. I think it would be a good plan for any blind beginner to adopt. After he succeeds with it, he might then try other systems.

What Mr. DeLong did was this. He built several large battery pens—he has, by the way, built all his own chicken houses from standard plans. These battery pens are constructed of a wooden framework, 8 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 3 feet high. There is a board floor, and the sides and top are covered with wire poultry netting. One division of the netting is placed through the center of each cage—making twin sections, each 4 x 4 x 3. These batteries are placed in double rows, one on top of the other, and are used for brooding cages.

In these Mr. DeLong sets brood hens on eggs selected from his own flock. As a working basis, he carries in his flock of Leghorn egg producers about 20 to 25 heavy breed—Wyandottes—for brooding purposes. These set more willingly on the nest and brood the young chicks better than the lighter Leghorns. The beginner might buy ten to fifteen hens of a heavy type—Hampshire, Wyandottes, etc., and sufficient good Leghorn eggs to provide a clutch of twelve eggs for each hen. Leghorn eggs are recommended, since the pure white eggs usually command a premium in most markets over the tinted or brown egg. Many good hatcheries will sell fertile eggs from a good laying strain with some guarantee of hatchability. The price varies from 4 to 7 cents each, depending on the location, season, and laying record of the birds from which the eggs were taken.

In this battery brooder Mr. DeLong prepares a floor litter, a nest, and a nest box with the clutch of eggs in it. He then introduces a hen who has shown a desire to set. He visits her several times during the day. If she is uneasy after twelve hours in the nest, he removes her and tries another until he finds one that will set.

Each brooder battery is tagged in Braille with the hatching date (21 days), number of eggs in the clutch, record of the brooding hen, and any other important facts. By using this battery pen Mr. DeLong is able to control the bird during the hatching period; to dust the nest and hen periodically with disinfectant powder; to give food and water in proper amounts; and to catch any broken eggs—all with a minimum effort. He figures it's wise to let the hen do most of the work because she knows how so much better than he does.

When the Braille card on the pen tells him that hatching day has arrived, he feels carefully for the new chicks, listens for signs of life in the remaining unhatched eggs, and sets out food for the baby chicks. The chicks stay in this brooder battery with the mother hen, who is partially confined for about ten weeks. During this critical time in the small birds' life he can feed them efficiently, explore the cage daily for dead or sick chicks and, of course, he runs no danger of stepping on them. No heat is needed, for the hen protects the chicks during the night or a cold spell.

At about ten weeks, or as soon as they can be banded on the leg, the young pullets are put into a separate pen. The brood hen is then returned to the laying flock as an egg producer until she is needed again the next season. At present Mr. DeLong uses a series and combination of notches on the identification band to give him the needed information about the chick, but he is trying to develop some type of band which will be light, durable, and yet take Braille characters. The young cockerels are separated, fattened, and sold for broilers.

At the time he bands the birds he also makes up a permanent Braille record sheet with a complete case history that will tell him when each was hatched, laid her first egg, length of laying period, molt, brooding period if any, etc. This record enables him to choose the eggs from his best birds for the next year's hatch.

He usually buys his breeding cockerels each season to introduce new vigorous strains to his flock. As soon as the pullet lays her first egg she is promoted to a

laying house—each house holds 100 birds, which he has found is the maximum for good results—and she is then a full-fledged member in good standing of a busy, healthy, egg-producing flock.

Can Work without Light

"Once a month," says Mr. DeLong, "I cull all my flock at night. Many of my sighted friends in the poultry business complain they find this hard to do without using lights which disturb the birds. Well, this is one place I'm ahead of them, because light or no light, I can do my work just the same. I go along the roost and feel each bird carefully, especially the comb. A soft, resilient, well-developed comb means a laying bird. Whatever culls are found are removed and sold for meat. There are not as many proportionately as in the usual commercial flock.

"Nor do I lose many birds from disease. I have never had an epidemic in my flock. Disease is the poultryman's worst enemy, and the best preventative against it is to start with healthy, sturdy stock; to keep everything as clean as you'd want it for yourself; and to feed your birds well. Then the battle's half won. I watch my birds' food consumption carefully, for this reflects their general condition. The way they 'talk' when I enter the pen tells me much.

"Chickens brooded by a hen, I am firmly convinced, require less care, resist disease better, live longer, and develop fewer culls —consequently more egg return per bird.

"I can do all my own work with the poultry unaided except for one thing: I have no way to tell when a chicken is dead on the floor of a pen or when an egg has been laid somewhere out of the nest. Neither happens very often, yet it is important that they be taken care of when they do. My wife helps me on this score. But I have often wondered for the totally unaided blind breeder if the Guide Dog could not be trained to call her master's attention to the dead fowl or misplaced egg. I certainly think some type of hunting dog could be used to retrieve."

Mr. DeLong collects his eggs two or three times a day in a wire basket and stores them in a cool place. Since he changes the litter and nests often, he seldom has soiled eggs. If there is a small spot, he usually catches it and cleans it, for he turns each egg carefully in his hand as he weighs it. He has never had a complaint about dirty eggs, which is an enviable record for any producer.

He used to grade the eggs for size in an ordinary balance scale; but after some experience found, as most poultrymen do, that he could accurately judge the weight of an egg by merely taking it in his hand.

Marketing of Eggs

There are a number of ways the eggs can be sold. One who has the time and ability to sell and a Guide Dog might try to work up a door-to-door retail route. This would probably insure the highest return on the eggs. Mr. DeLong explains that he needs all his time to care for his chickens, and in general he dislikes selling. He has a small retail route, which his wife handles. They also have a number of customers who call regularly at the house. Some of his surplus goes to young neighbors who sell the eggs at 5 cts. per dozen commission. Another way is to write markets, hotels, boarding houses, or stores nearby and offer them high quality, strictly fresh, graded eggs at market prices.

Perhaps the market that offers the best return for the least expenditure of time and energy is the cooperative egg auction, where one exists in the community. As the name implies they are cooperative auctions to sell eggs, controlled by the members who pay a small fee to join. The purpose is to sell eggs and poultry to retailers and wholesalers in open auction. The full price received for the eggs, less a slight handling, grading and management fee, is returned directly to each member. By maintaining high standards for quality and a plentiful supply at all times, the price obtained is usually very good.

Qualifications and Capital Needed

For the beginner, blind as well as the sighted handicapped, it would be better to raise poultry for eggs—the blind carrying a few brood hens to replenish their flock by Mr. DeLong's battery method. Raising chickens for breeding purposes alone is another whole industry which requires training and experience. In raising poultry for eggs it would be well to start with a small flock, say 100 birds, to test one's ability, aptitude and possibilities.

"First," Mr. DeLong advises, "you must have the right temperament, if you want to succeed with chickens. You must really like them and honestly care for their welfare and comfort if you want eggs in return.

"Second, it's hard work and requires dependability and patience. The birds must be fed on time—their scratch ration, for example, must be put out at exactly the same time before sundown every day. This means every day, seven days a week, no holidays off. And you may have to get up on cold nights and investigate a squawk of alarm from your pens.

"Third, you need capital to carry you for the first six months until your birds begin to lay. How much money depends on how,

when, and where you start. By my method your approximate cost per 100 ready-to-lay birds might be as follows for the beginning year. Subsequent years with your own eggs and brood hens, it would be cheaper.

	Debit	Credit
225 hatching eggs at .04	$ 9.00	
20 brooding hens at $1.50 ea Less 10% non-hatchability you would receive 100 pullets and 100 cockerels	30.00	
Feed (Mash, scratch, grit) at .75 per pullet to laying	75.00	
Feed to fatten cockerels for market, 10 weeks	30.00	
Received for 90 cockerels (10% mortality) for broilers. Av. 2 lbs at 20c per lb.		$36.00
Received for 20 hens after brooding period (Feed costs include hens feed while on nest and refattening after)		30.
	$144.00	$66.00

"Allowing a 10% mortality among the pullets, you would have 90 hens ready to lay eggs for a net cost of $78. This does not include, of course, houses or equipment. That would depend on local prices for lumber or ready constructed buildings."

Monetary Returns

As to whether the blind breeder, in fact any breeder, can make money in poultry is a question one can only answer for himself.

"Barring your complete failure from poor stock, disease in your flock, vermin, fire, or some other misfortune, based on a peace-time market, your net return would average from $1 to $2 per year per bird. This means after all food, perishable equipment, stock, etc., has been paid for and some return made on the investment in buildings. Many breeders claim a return of $3 and even more per bird per year. But, as I told a beginner last year, 'We blind will keep our eyes closed to any such claims at least until they come true for us'."

War Brings Opportunities

"This is a good time to start poultry raising," Mr. DeLong avers. "Many sighted raisers have gone to defense jobs or war—in this locality anyway, so their equipment and houses might be available. Eggs and poultry are bringing good prices. Although feed costs have risen, it has not been out of proportion."

How many chickens can one keep? That depends entirely on the individual. Mr. DeLong believes the average blind operator, in good health, working full time and with no other duties—such as selling eggs on a route—could unaided manage 500 birds successfully, starting them with his battery brooders. With good modern houses and modern equipment, running water, and with some sighted assistance, the number could be increased appreciably.

"The great field for the blind in poultry is only beginning to open up," he says enthusiastically, "and beyond the money profit, there are extra dividends. It offers active outdoor work, which is interesting and has a varied routine. It is work that keeps you busy and alert and leaves you no time for worry. And now that our government has called for increased farm products to win the war, it makes me feel pretty good to know that I can do my part. I can't be in the battle line but I can work for victory on the food front at home."

Reading Sources

For fundamental knowledge Mr. DeLong learned through the Pa. Ass'n. for the Blind (Lehigh Co. Branch) about the free correspondence course given by the Hadley Institute of Winnetka, Wis. These lessons together with the school's own text-books for this course were also supplied in Braille. He also visited the poultry farms at the Overbrook School for the Blind, Philadelphia.

"There is a great amount of material available on poultry keeping, some in Braille," he explains. "Authoritative literature includes Dawley's "Poultry Keeping for Junior Poultrymen"; L. M. Hurd's "Practical Poultry Farming," 4 vols. (1932); and the series of booklets, "Poultry Husbandry," published by the International Correspondence School, Scranton, Pa. The U. S. Dept. of Agriculture offers fine booklets on various phases of the subject at a cost of 5 to 10 cts. "The Poultry Tribune" (Mount Morris, Ill.) and "The American Poultry Journal" (Chicago, Ill.) are very reliable.

"As new material is issued in Braille, your State library will probably be glad to advise you. In your local County Farm Agent you will undoubtedly find a helpful, patient, well-trained adviser whom you can consult on any phase of poultry keeping which puzzles you. However, the problems of the blind operator, as I have found, are so specialized that much you hear and read will have to be adapted to your needs as you go along."

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Delong, Michael

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